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The Secret of Socrates

IN TALKING WITH PEOPLE, DON'T BEGIN BY DISCUSSING THE THINGS on which you differ. Begin by emphasizing—and keep on emphasizing—the things on which you agree. Keep emphasizing, if possible, that you are both striving for the same end and that your only difference is one of method and not of purpose.

Get the other person saying “Yes, yes” at the outset. Keep your opponent, if possible, from saying “No.”

A “No” response, according to Professor Overstreet,* is a most difficult handicap to overcome. When you have said “No,” all your pride of personality demands that you remain consistent with yourself. You may later feel that the “No” was ill-advised; nevertheless, there is your precious pride to consider! Once having said a thing, you feel you must stick to it. Hence it is of the very greatest importance that a person be started in the affirmative direction.

*Harry A. Overstreet, *Influencing Human Behavior* (New York: Norton, 1925).

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The skillful speaker gets, at the outset, a number of "Yes" responses. This sets the psychological process of the listeners moving in the affirmative direction. It is like the movement of a billiard ball. Propel in one direction, and it takes some force to deflect it; far more force to send it back in the opposite direction.

The psychological patterns here are quite clear. When a person says "No" and really means it, he or she is doing far more than saying a word of two letters. The entire organism—glandular, nervous, muscular—gathers itself together into a condition of rejection. There is, usually in minute but sometimes in observable degree, a physical withdrawal or readiness for withdrawal. The whole neuromuscular system, in short, sets itself on guard against acceptance. When, to the contrary, a person says "Yes," none of the withdrawal activities takes place. The organism is in a forward-moving, accepting, open attitude. Hence the more "Yeses" we can, at the very outset, induce, the more likely we are to succeed in capturing the attention for our ultimate proposal.

It is a very simple technique—this yes response. And yet, how much it is neglected! It often seems as if people get a sense of their own importance by antagonizing others at the outset.

Get a student to say "No" at the beginning, or a customer, child, husband, or wife, and it takes the wisdom and the patience of angels to transform that bristling negative into an affirmative.

The use of this "yes, yes" technique enabled James Eberson, who was a teller in the Greenwich Savings Bank, in New York City, to secure a prospective customer who might otherwise have been lost.

"This man came in to open an account," said Mr. Eberson, "and I gave him our usual form to fill out. Some of the questions he answered willingly, but there were others he flatly refused to answer.

"Before I began the study of human relations, I would have told this prospective depositor that if he refused to give the bank this information, we should have to refuse to accept this account. I am ashamed that I have been guilty of doing that very thing in the past. Naturally, an ultimatum like that made me feel good. I

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had shown who was boss, that the bank's rules and regulations couldn't be flouted. But that sort of attitude certainly didn't give a feeling of welcome and importance to the man who had walked in to give us his patronage.

"I resolved this morning to use a little horse sense. I resolved not to talk about what the bank wanted but about what the customer wanted. And above all else, I was determined to get him saying 'yes, yes' from the very start. So I agreed with him. I told him the information he refused to give was not absolutely necessary.

" 'However,' I said, 'suppose you have money in this bank at your death. Wouldn't you like to have the bank transfer it to your next of kin, who is entitled to it according to law?'

" 'Yes, of course,' he replied.

" 'Don't you think,' I continued, 'that it would be a good idea to give us the name of your next of kin so that, in the event of your death, we could carry out your wishes without error or delay?'

"Again he said, 'Yes.'

"The young man's attitude softened and changed when he realized that we weren't asking for this information for our sake but for his sake. Before leaving the bank, this young man not only gave me complete information about himself but he opened, at my suggestion, a trust account, naming his mother as the beneficiary for his account, and he had gladly answered all the questions concerning his mother also.

"I found that by getting him to say 'yes, yes' from the outset, he forgot the issue at stake and was happy to do all the things I suggested."

Joseph Allison, a sales representative for Westinghouse Electric Company, had this story to tell: "There was a man in my territory that our company was most eager to sell to. My predecessor had called on him for ten years without selling anything. When I took over the territory, I called steadily for three years without getting an order. Finally, after thirteen years of calls and sales talk, we sold him a few motors. If these proved to be all right, an order for several hundred more would follow. Such was my expectation.

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"Right? I knew they would be all right. So when I called three weeks later, I was in high spirits.

"The chief engineer greeted me with this shocking announcement: 'Allison, I can't buy the remainder of the motors from you.'

" 'Why?' I asked in amazement. 'Why?'

" 'Because your motors are too hot. I can't put my hand on them.'

"I knew it wouldn't do any good to argue. I had tried that sort of thing too long. So I thought of getting the 'yes, yes,' response.

" 'Well, now look, Mr. Smith,' I said. 'I agree with you a hundred percent; if those motors are running too hot, you ought not to buy any more of them. You must have motors that won't run any hotter than standards set by the National Electrical Manufacturers Association. Isn't that so?'

"He agreed it was. I had gotten my first 'yes.'

" 'The Electrical Manufacturers Association regulations say that a properly designed motor may have a temperature of 72 degrees Fahrenheit above room temperature. Is that correct?'

" 'Yes,' he agreed. 'That's quite correct. But your motors are much hotter.'

"I didn't argue with him. I merely asked: 'How hot is the mill room?'

" 'Oh,' he said, 'about 75 degrees Fahrenheit.'

" 'Well,' I replied, 'if the mill room is 75 degrees and you add 72 to that, that makes a total of 147 degrees Fahrenheit. Wouldn't you scald your hand if you held it under a spigot of hot water at a temperature of 147 degrees Fahrenheit?'

"Again he had to say 'yes.'

" 'Well,' I suggested, 'wouldn't it be a good idea to keep your hands off those motors?'

" 'Well, I guess you're right,' he admitted. We continued to chat for a while. Then he called his secretary and lined up approximately \$35,000 worth of business for the ensuing month.

"It took me years and cost me countless thousands of dollars in lost business before I finally learned that it doesn't pay to argue, that it is much more profitable and much more interesting to look

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at things from the other person's viewpoint and try to get that person saying 'yes, yes.'"

Eddie Snow, who sponsors our courses in Oakland, California, tells how he became a good customer of a shop because the proprietor got him to say "yes, yes." Eddie had become interested in bow hunting and had spent considerable money in purchasing equipment and supplies from a local bow store. When his brother was visiting him he wanted to rent a bow for him from this store. The sales clerk told him they didn't rent bows, so Eddie phoned another bow store. Eddie described what happened:

"A very pleasant gentleman answered the phone. His response to my question for a rental was completely different from the other place. He said he was sorry but they no longer rented bows because they couldn't afford to do so. He then asked me if I had rented before. I replied, 'Yes, several years ago.' He reminded me that I probably paid \$25 to \$30 for the rental. I said 'yes' again. He then asked if I was the kind of person who liked to save money. Naturally, I answered 'yes.' He went on to explain that they had bow sets with all the necessary equipment on sale for \$34.95. I could buy a complete set for only \$4.95 more than I could rent one. He explained that is why they had discontinued renting them. Did I think that was reasonable? My 'yes' response led to a purchase of the set, and when I picked it up I purchased several more items at this shop and have since become a regular customer."

Socrates, "the gadfly of Athens," was one of the greatest philosophers the world has ever known. He did something that only a handful of men in all history have been able to do: he sharply changed the whole course of human thought; and now, twenty-four centuries after his death, he is honored as one of the wisest persuaders who ever influenced this wrangling world.

His method? Did he tell people they were wrong? Oh, no, not Socrates. He was far too adroit for that. His whole technique, now called the "Socratic method," was based upon getting a "yes, yes" response. He asked questions with which his opponent would have to agree. He kept on winning one admission after another

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until he had an armful of yeses. He kept on asking questions until finally, almost without realizing it, his opponents found themselves embracing a conclusion they would have bitterly denied a few minutes previously.

The next time we are tempted to tell someone he or she is wrong, let's remember old Socrates and ask a gentle question—a question that will get the “yes, yes” response.

The Chinese have a proverb pregnant with the age-old wisdom of the Orient: “He who treads softly goes far.”

They have spent five thousand years studying human nature, those cultured Chinese, and they have garnered a lot of perspicacity: “*He who treads softly goes far.*”

PRINCIPLE 5

Get the other person saying “yes, yes” immediately.
